

Me and the Bank

I flicked at the dried-up bug with my thumbnail and managed to pry it off the windshield. Just then, the pump gave a ‘ding’ and quit. I glanced over at it.

“Two seventy-five, Mrs. Broome. Want me to check your oil?” I holstered the nozzle and tossed the dirty paper towels into the trash bin that sat on the concrete island.

Mrs. Broome rolled her window down and handed out three ones. “Now, Johnnie Stevens, you know you checked it the other day and it was fine. Just keep the change, Johnnie. No other service station in town can get my windscreen that clean. You take care now, you hear?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I touched the brim of my cap.

Mrs. Broome cranked up her 54 Chevy and slammed it into drive. I winced as the gears complained, then I watched her creep out into the street.

Mr. Carson stuck his head out the station door and croaked, “Johnnie? Call for you!”

I glanced around. No customers coming in either direction, so I headed into the station.

My station, I mean to say. I’d saved and worked overtime at two jobs and scrimped and gone without, and now I owned my own filling station—well, me and the bank. Not the biggest in town—not yet, anyway—but we gave the best service, me and the other two boys and Mr. Carson, and we had us lots of repeat customers.

Mr. Carson handed me the phone when I got inside.

“Steven’s Service; how may I help you?” I asked, and if my chest swelled a little in pride, well, I’m sure you can understand.

“Johns, that you?” The voice was harsh, ragged, but I knew who it was at once.

“It’s me, Al. What’s the matter?”

“Can you get over here? Now?”

I opened my mouth to say: “Al, I run my own business now. I can’t just up and leave in the middle of the day,” but what came out was: “I’m on my way.”

That’s the way it always was with me and Al Brown. We’d been friends since first grade. He’d helped me pass math and English and, to be honest, pretty much everything else except shop each year, and I’d kept him from getting his block knocked off by the school bullies. Then, when we’d graduated in ’52—him valedictorian with colleges throwing scholarships at him like confetti, and me third from the bottom—he’d gone off to State U. I’d continued working where I’d started at thirteen—at Carson’s Filling Station.

But Mr. Carson’s boy Billy Ray ate a gun in ’48—seems he couldn’t get over what he’d seen and what had been done to him during the big war—and after that Mr. Carson just kind of lost interest in everything but stuff that came in a bottle, and I’m not talking about Coke or RC. I kind of moved on up the ladder, taking on more and more of the responsibilities and then—with some help from the bank, as I done said—the business.

So Carson’s Filling Station is now Stevens’s Filling Station. Sounds good, don’t it? Especially for a boy whose nickname in school was Stupo?

I hung up the phone, glanced out the window. I was lucky; it was the quiet time of the day. School wouldn’t let out for two more hours, when the hot rodders would be swinging in for fill-ups, and to brag about how much gas their engines used.

“Mr. Carson, can you watch the station for a little while? Tommy’ll be here right after school, so it won’t be but for just a couple of hours, and with any luck a whole lot less.”

“Sure, Johnnie boy. Just you don’t worry about nothing, hear me?” He nodded his head, his white hair straggling into his face. His bleary old eyes looked like they were different colors, but one was just going pale with the cataract.

I smiled at him and looked confident. Of course, I knew he’d have that bottle in the brown paper bag—the one he didn’t know I knew was hidden behind the oil rack—in his hand before I was out of sight. But then again, it was the quiet time of day, and Mr. Carson had been good to me—and it was Al who’d called. I have always my whole life tended to do what Al told me to do.

So I jumped in my old Studebaker and left...but not without checking the street again, in both directions.

I hadn’t asked where Al was cause I knew where he had to be. Since he’d been kicked out of State University—the local paper had said something about a ‘miscalculation during an experiment’ but I knew cause he told me that he’d blown up the chem lab—he’s been back in town, living with his Mama and Daddy out on Route Eleven. Back behind their home was the old barn that Al’d taken over as his own personal property right after we both started second grade, when he was almost five and I had just turned nine.

I parked the Studebaker in the driveway. Mrs. Brown was just stepping onto the back porch as I got out. She had on a right pretty pink dress, and her gray hair was done up in a neat sort of bun.

“How you, Johnnie?” she called. She was setting out a pie to cool on a rickety little wooden table.

“Just fine, ma’am, and you? My goodness, that pie smells good enough to eat.”

“It’ll be ready to cut in about half an hour. See if you can bring Alton out with you for a piece, will you? He’s been missing way too many meals and ain’t no bigger than a button. I’ll make you boys some lemonade to wash this old pie down with.”

“Sure thing, ma’am”

I walked on across the wide back yard. It was littered with some of Al’s failed experiments, and I recognized most all of them—didn’t understand them, mind you, but I recognized them. I’d helped him build almost every single one of them, carrying and lifting and putting things where he told me to. Al’s brain is a mystery to me, and to most everyone else who comes in touch with it. But he’d always been kind to me, and that’s a fact. Brain and Brawn, that’s what they called us two all through school. Al always liked being called Brain, and I didn’t much care much what they called me, long as they didn’t call me late to dinner. That’s a joke I learned once. Pretty funny, ain’t it?

I proceeded on across the yard, with a couple of chickens keeping me company most of the way. The door to the barn was closed; I pounded on it a time or two before I heard any sound from inside. A buzz, a hum, then clangs as something metal slid against more metal.

Al had invented him some new locks, seemed like.

The door—it was a people-sized door set into the big old double barn door—opened just a crack and Al peered out.

“You alone?” he croaked.

I turned and surveyed the yard. The Brown place was way out on Route Eleven, like I done said, and there wasn't anyone living within a couple of miles except for them chickens and three cows in the field next door.

I turned back. "Seems like I am. You okay? Your Mama says you ain't been eating much." Me, I don't understand people who miss meals, and that's a fact.

"No time, no time. Come in. Hurry!" He opened the door wider, and Mrs. Brown's old yellow tomcat streaked out like his tail was on fire and the boogeyman was riding it.

I slid inside and Al slammed the door shut behind me. He reached up and mashed a button and about a dozen locks hummed into place.

Al sighed in relief. He grabbed me by the forearm. He wasn't tall enough to reach much higher than that, though he had the biggest head I'd ever seen on any mortal soul. I'm just the opposite; big husky body, not much riding on top.

But I do own my own filling station, me and the bank, like I done told you.

"Come over here, Johns. Something I have to show you."

I followed him across the barn floor. It was still dirt, still strewn with old hay, and still had the smell of cow rising up from it, even after all these years. But at the back of the barn, me and Al—well, mostly me—had laid down some boards we'd got at the dump, or took down from the loft, and had made a pretty level sort of a floor. That's where Al led me.

"There!" he said, waving his hand, his voice kind of pleased and excited and expectant, all at the same time.

I looked to where he'd waved. A pair of old phone booths, their glass covered over with black paint that had dripped onto the boards below them—Al never was a good hand with a paintbrush—stood about ten feet apart. Between the booths, but not connected to them in any

way I could see, was lots of wires and tubes and stuff clustered around what looked like a generator with a big old glass bubble stuck on top.

“Uh, okay,” I said carefully. Al didn’t much like it when people laughed at his inventions. I think that’s the main reason we had got along as long and as well as we had. I never laughed, even when I wanted to. “I’m looking. But, Al. What am I looking at?”

“Johns,” Al breathed, “just the most important invention of the twentieth century, that’s all.”

“Well, now,” I said, still keeping all solemn like, “I’m awful pleased you wanted to show it to me, and I am purely pleased for you and all. But...what does it do?”

Al gave that snort that meant ‘idiot’—not that he’d ever called me anything like that, of course, but he’d used it on plenty of other guys we’d been to school with, so I knew durn well what it meant. “Johns, this is a teleportation device. Te-le-por-ta-tion. You put something in this chamber—” he opened the left phone booth, grabbed one of his Mama’s old clay flowerpots, wrote the date on it with a grease pencil, and set it inside, “—then you set the coordinates on this control panel.”

He trotted over to what he called the control panel; it looked like he’d rigged it using parts from an old Ford dashboard. That dashboard had been mixed in with some stuff I’d let him have from the junkyard I’m starting out behind my station. Al flipped a couple of switches, dialed a rheostat, and punched a big red button.

A hum filled the dusty air of the barn. A bright light glowed for an instant inside the big glass bubble on top of what looked like a generator.

Then it died away and everything was just the same as before.

“Open it, Johns.”

I pulled the booth door open. It creaked. Needed to oil them hinges. I looked inside.

Empty. No sign of a flowerpot nor anything else. Heck, not even any dust, which surprised me more than a little. Al has never been known for being neat.

I leaned down and patted the floor. Solid.

I shrugged. “Okay, you got me, Al, and I don’t mind a bit admitting it. Where’d it go?”

“Johns, that old flowerpot is now disintegrated into its component atoms. They’re floating around us, as we speak, just as billions of other atoms are doing the same.”

I nodded, tried to look like I understood what he was saying. “Okay, Al. If you say it, I know it’s gotta be true. But all I can see is, you’ve invented the world’s best flowerpot destructor. You got some other use for this here thing?”

Al grinned that cocky grin that meant: *Watch this!* I must have seen that grin a thousand times.

He reached out to his cobbled-together console, turned another rheostat, hit a black button this time. A hum, different from the first, and another flash of light in the big glass bubble.

“Now check inside that booth over there.”

I went over to it, pulled the door open. He must have greased this one cause it moved real smooth, and didn’t make no more noise than a cat. Sure enough, a flowerpot with today’s date—September 17, 1957—sat on the floor. I leaned over and picked it up. It wasn’t even warm; just felt like every other flowerpot I’d ever held.

“Can you see what this will mean, Johns?” Al was doing his little victory dance around the floor; he looked like a scrawny squirrel stricken with the palsy. “A revolution in travel and

transport. Anything can be moved anywhere with the press of a button. We're on the edge, my boy, on the very edge of a brave new world!"

I sighed. I never was much good at keeping up with the speed of Al's brain. "Cause you can distegr—dinsidi—take a flowerpot apart and put it back together again, it's gonna be a whole new world?"

"No," he snapped. Al had him a temper at times, believe you me. He used to get all riled and lay into me; not that he ever hurt me, don't think that, even when he grabbed him a two-by-four. Al ain't got but one big muscle, and it's between his ears. "But what if I can disintegrate absolutely anything, including people—including people, Johns—and then reintegrate them anywhere else, even across the world? What will that kind of power do to the railroads, the airplanes, the shipping lines, the truckers, the car manufacturers? What if I can set systems up like this throughout the world, with senders and receivers everywhere—it's possible, Johns, and it's cheap, too—what will it do to our current means of transportation? Think of it, Johns. It's as great as, heck, it's greater than electricity or the atom bomb!"

Atom bomb. Lots of people died when that atom bomb went off, I heard tell. Didn't seem like the very best time to mention that fact to Al, though.

Al had commenced his little palsied squirrel dance again, so I looked over his set-up, this time with a new interest. It sure didn't look like he'd spent much money; most everything was second-hand and without a doubt from my junkyard or the town dump.

Then I thought of something. I don't think of stuff too often, so I looked the idea over to see if it was worth mentioning. I didn't see anything wrong with it up front, so I chanced a mention to Al.

“You said people. Can people get their atoms dis—uh, took apart and live through it and all?”

Al stopped in mid-step and grinned at me. His scrawny face was pale and the pimples across his nose stood out like redbirds against snow. “Actually, Johns, I’m not entirely sure. I’ve sent bugs through, and Ginger Snap—” that was his Mama’s big old yellow tomcat, the one what had run out the door when I was coming in, “—with no ascertainable or demonstrable ill effects. Now it’s time for the final test. That’s, uh, well, that’s why I called you. I need a test subject.”

I thought about that for a minute or two, while Al went off into another step or two of his dance. “Well, now, Al. I don’t rightly know as I’ve a mind to be a test subject. I never did do real good on tests in school, as you know yourself. Maybe you should go through it instead. Your atoms is probably going to separate better’n mine ever will.”

“Can’t do it,” Al snapped. “I need to observe and record the experiment...and besides, you don’t know how to run the equipment.”

I shrugged. “Well, I reckon anything Ginger Snap can do, I can at least give her a try.”

Next thing I knew, I was standing inside the left-hand booth. It was dark but there was some light sneaking in through places Al had missed with his brush.

“Ready?” I heard Al call, his squeaky voice sounding kind of muffled through the black-painted glass.

“Ready,” I replied.

Then I heard a snap and a hum and I got awful sleepy just for a second or two, and then the booth door slid open.

“Johns. How do you feel?”

Al's face was even paler than usual, with excitement I was guessing. That was something I didn't rightly understand, seeing as how nothing had happened.

"Just fine, though I did come over all sleepy a minute ago." I yawned. "You still going to test your new invention?"

"I just did, Johns! Come out here."

I stepped outside the phone booth—but I was in the right-hand side one. I had entered the left hand side one.

Well, people may call me a fool—even people who don't own their own filling station—but I knew that Al had done something big this time. I reached out and shook him by the hand, and he grinned like they'd just voted him president and threw in king of the world and a thousand bucks.

"Just think, Johns. A totally new method of travel. It's...it's..."

"It sure is," I agreed. I patted him one time on the back and he almost fell down.

"One thing, though..." I said. "Just one little bitty tiny thing...it probably ain't nothing..."

"What?" Al snapped. "What?" He looked worried, like he'd just caught sight of half a dozen football players from our high school class, and they was all swinging wet towels.

"Well," I said, "seems to me like you'd want to get *your* atoms all took apart too, just so's you can report on what it's like to Walter Cronkite and all them people at the newspapers and everybody."

"Of course!" He was even more excited now, I could see. "The control process is simple enough for a child of six to operate, so you should have no trouble. Come here." He grabbed my wrist and dragged me to the console. "Look, Johns, it's easy. You set this rheostat to seven." He

took the grease pencil out of his pocket protector and marked a great big 7 beside the dial. “Then you hit the red button. Then, after you check that I’m gone from booth alpha, you set this rheostat to nine,” he wrote a lopsided 9 beside a different dial, “and push this black button. Red, seven. Black, nine. That’s all there is to it, Johns.”

“No harder than balancing a tire,” I said.

“Which will soon be obsolete,” he laughed.

I nodded, my eyes on the console.

“You’re sure you’ve got it, Johns?” Al sounded a mite worried.

“Sure do,” I said.

“Then let’s do this thing!” He pounded me on the back, then ran over to the left-hand booth and got inside. He grinned at me and made a thumbs-up sign with both his hands.

“Ready, assistant?” he called.

“Ready, inventor!” I replied.

Al pulled the door shut.

I set the rheostat to seven and pushed the red button.

Hum, buzz, flash of light. I walked over to check the booth Al had just entered.

Empty.

Then I looked around the barn. There. That was just what I needed.

I picked up the crowbar and commenced to breaking up everything I thought might be part of Al’s latest experiment. I didn’t want anyone to be able to put it back together again, or even figure out what it might have been made to do.

I was going to miss Al, and I didn’t know yet what I was going to tell his mama. She sure wasn’t going to like whatever it was I told her.

But I couldn't let any crazy invention to do away with cars and trucks and busses and such like. If they was all gone, then there wouldn't be much need for gas or tires or even roads, now would there?

Did I mention that I own my own filling station?

Well, me and the bank.

End